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AFGHANISTAN

SUCCESS STORY

Saving Newborns in Rural Afghanistan

Helping protect the lives of Afghan babies born at home



Photo: USAID/BASICS

A community health worker provides basic newborn care information to Miriam from Bamyan Province.

USAID's BASICS project is working with NGOs to train Community Health Workers in essential maternal and newborn care. These are simple but important things that can be done to preserve the lives of Afghanistan's newborns.

Miriam in Bamyan Province has three children – two other infants died within days of birth. She has just given birth to her sixth child. However, this birth was different from the previous ones. Miriam and her female relatives have learned from the local female community health worker (CHW) about the importance of keeping the baby warm.

The old custom of bathing a newborn soon after birth is dangerous because the baby could easily become cold and get sick. Instead, the baby should be gently dried with a towel and placed next to the mother's skin. Washing a baby can and should wait until later. The CHW said, "Until I received training about the care of newborn babies, I followed our old customs. I did not realize how important it is to keep the baby warm after it is born. Placing the newborn on the mother's skin is so simple, and the mothers like it, too."

With nearly nine out of 10 births in Afghanistan still occurring in the home, USAID's Basic Support for Institutionalizing Child Survival (BASICS) project is working with NGOs to train CHWs in essential maternal and newborn care so they can teach pregnant mothers and their families the simple but important things they can do to preserve the lives of newborns. CHWs learn the importance of ensuring that the baby is breathing immediately after it is born, promoting good care of the umbilical cord by cutting it with a clean instrument at the proper distance from the baby's abdomen, starting exclusive breastfeeding for the baby immediately after birth, and as mentioned, keeping the baby warm by placing it on the mother.

Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health and USAID are seeking to help save the lives of babies born in rural homes by ensuring that CHWs know the key newborn care lessons to share with pregnant mothers and their families. Families can now be more confident and better prepared for their babies' births. Through efforts in many small villages and communities, CHWs seek to reduce the unnecessary newborn deaths that occur throughout the country.